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PM faces renewed push for a treaty; - Turnbull agrees Australia was invaded

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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's endorsement of the word "invasion" to describe European settlement of Australia has come as a renewed push for a formal treaty with Indigenous Australians emerged on the campaign trail.

Senior community leaders, including the chairman of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, Warren Mundine, and National Congress of Australia's First Peoples boss, Geoff Scott, called for a legally binding treaty with Indigenous Australians on Tuesday. But Mr Turnbull said it risked undermining momentum for the planned 2017 referendum.

Campaigning in Perth, Mr Turnbull agreed with the description of invasion for the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, long opposed by some politicians and commentators.

"Well, I think it can be fairly described as that and I've got no doubt, obviously, our first Aboriginal Australians describe it as an invasion," Mr Turnbull said.

"But, you know, you are talking about an historical argument about a word. The facts are very well-known. This country was Aboriginal land. It was occupied by Aboriginal people for tens of thousands of years - 40,000 years."

Criticising Opposition Leader Bill Shorten's comments about pursuing a treaty agreement similar to those in place in New Zealand and Canada, Mr Turnbull argued the discussion could jeopardise efforts for securing "an overwhelming consensus of Australians" for constitutional change.

Mr Scott accused the government of ignoring long-standing efforts to achieve a treaty. "There needs to be a relationship first off, leading to a treaty," he said. "How can you have recognition in this country if the government won't have a relationship with the people they are trying to recognise?"

He said questions about white settlement required courage from Australia's political leaders. "If someone came into the country and took it forcibly, it's an invasion."

Mr Mundine, appointed to lead the advisory council by former prime minister Tony Abbott, said a debate about a treaty and constitutional change could take place simultaneously. "Australia is probably the only ... country of the British Empire that hasn't really signed off a treaty with its Indigenous owners. It is something that is missing and needs to be discussed and I think it can be done very quickly."

Mr Turnbull's comments followed Mr Shorten's support for a treaty. The Labor leader said Indigenous Australians had been "dispossessed".

Assistant health minister Ken Wyatt, the first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives, said talk of a treaty was premature.

"I would have expected Mr Shorten not to take it to areas that create the shades of grey," he said. "That's what we don't need."

"Most Australians accept that when Australia was colonised it was another nation taking over the sovereign land of Aboriginal people but we've moved on a long way."

The Greens have called for the government to begin a treaty process alongside the referendum, and the Victorian government this year began talks with Indigenous communities to consider a treaty.

Some Indigenous leaders expressed frustration, saying the "invasion" descriptor brought about heated debate while there was a crisis in some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Many consider the landmark Mabo ruling of 1992 as having settled the question, while the concept of a treaty was not controversial for many community leaders.

Recognise joint campaign director Tanya Hosch said treaty proposals were gathering momentum.

"What we are seeing emerging in the election campaign is a reflection that Australians are ready for these important national conversations and that is a welcome development," Ms Hosch said.